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Shannon Litz / Tribune News Service

Douglas County on geotourism map

GARDNERVILLE, Nev. — As of August, prospective travelers perusing National Geographic's website can link to a website that features the Carson Valley Museum and Cultural Center, the Genoa Cowboy Poetry & Music Festival, or the Eagles and Agriculture event in Carson Valley.

In fact, they can learn about more than 400 destinations in the Sierra Nevada region, including about 50 in Douglas County.

By linking or going directly to www.sierranevadageotourism.org, viewers see a map that features attractions in Carson City, Douglas and Washoe counties in Nevada, and California's Nevada, Placer and El Dorado counties.

“It gives us a lot of visibility because they get millions of hits each day,” said Nicole DeJonghe, program director for the Sierra Business Council, which, along with the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, partnered with National Geographic and many other local sponsors in the Geotourism MapGuide project.

The map is interactive, currently has 1,300 registered users and gets more than 9,500 new visitors every month from 62 different countries, according to DeJonghe.

From June through August applications for about 600 Sierra Nevada destinations were submitted to the business council for consideration. The criteria includes places, events or businesses that “promote the distinctive geographical character of the region and its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents,” according to the National Geographic website.

Destination pages can be updated by registered users. Viewers can comment on pages, give them a “thumbs-up” or submit new nominations.

“It empowers the community members in determining where they want to drive the tourists,” DeJonghe said.

All applicants are reviewed by a Geocouncil committee before being selected, and DeJonghe, who serves as the Geocouncil's facilitator, said some nominations weren't selected due to safety or sensitivity reasons.

The Geocouncil consists of representatives from the art, history, culture, Native American, government and business sectors.

Bill Chernock, executive director of the Carson Valley Chamber and Visitors Authority, one of about 20 Geocouncil members, said the idea of geotourism came about in the early 1980s, with the green movement.

“It brings to light some of the lesser known, under-utilized national parks and state parks that are out

there,” he said. “It can be an old mining town, St. Mary’s church in Virginia City or the CVIC Hall in Minden.”

Chernock said the nominators all had one thing in common.

“They are passionate about their areas, and they wrote with that passion,” he said.

Sue Knight, entertainment chairperson for the Genoa Cowboy Poetry & Music Festival that debuted this year, said she thinks the festival made the cut because it met the criteria.

“We presented (the festival) in a way that showed how we plug the valley, the history of ranching, Basque history, Native American history and tried to encompass it and celebrate it, and I think we did that,” Knight said.

DeJonghe said National Geographic, a 122-year-old organization which also features Geotourism MapGuides for other countries on its website, contacted the Sierra Business Council in 2009 because of the two organizations’ common goals.

“National Geographic recognized the Sierra Nevada as one of nine geotouristic areas within the United States,” she said.

DeJonghe said there are four phases in the National Geographic Sierra Nevada Geotourism MapGuide project. The first was the Yosemite Gateway, then the Tahoe Emigrant Corridor, starting in January is the Southern Sierra, then the Northern Sierra Cascade.

The Sierra Business Council is currently working on grants to translate the website into Spanish and to make the website more interactive by allowing visitors to post more videos and audio recordings.

The business council also is accepting ongoing nominations for new destinations.

“The Sierra Nevada has a ton of resources,” DeJonghe said.

“It’s just a matter of deriving and directing that tourism in a healthy and sustainable way.”